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Midwife-Witches: Examining Midwives and Women's Magick in Ami McKay's *The Birth House*

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Midwife-Witches: Examining Midwives and Women's Magick in Ami McKay's The Birth House

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Résumé

Ce mémoire explore le concept de la sagefemme-sorcière dans le contexte de la masculinisation et la médicalisation du processus de l'accouchement. En m'appuyant sur le roman *The Birth House*, par Ami McKay, je développerai trois chapitres qui traitent de l'histoire du domaine obstétrique, la chasse aux sorcières, ainsi que l'historique de l'archétype de la sorcière dans un contexte féministe afin d'illuminer la caractérisation de Dora et Miss Babineau en tant que des véritables sorcières, malgré qu'elle ne pratiquent pas de magie dans l'histoire. De plus, ce mémoire examinera les implications féministes de l'adoption littéraire de l'archétype de la sorcière en ce qui concerne la culture populaire et le climat politique actuel en Amérique du Nord grâce à l'adoption d'une perspective historique afin d'illustrer l'importance culturelle non seulement du roman, mais des personnages qui y habitent.

Mots-clés: sagefemme, sorcière, féminisme, médecine obstétrique, accouchement

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the notion of the midwife-witch and how it relates to the medicalization and masculinization of birth as portrayed in *The Birth House* by Ami McKay. This subject is divided in three chapters that give historical context to the emergence of obstetrics and the prosecution of midwives, the history of the archetype of the witch and how it is explored in the characterization of Dora and Miss Babineau, as well as the feminist implications of the figure of the midwife-witch and how it is relevant to the current political and cultural climate. I argue that McKay's novel fictionalizes the question of how witchcraft influenced the process of excluding women from medicine as well as reinforces the overall patriarchal subjugation of women. In turn, the text suggests that the key to transcending gender-based oppression lies in embracing the magick of womanhood: the power to create life. This thesis draws a timeline in the history of women's medicine, witch hunts, and feminism to show how these three elements interact in McKay's novel, which serves as a feminist retelling of the real-world implications and power of negotiating and claiming identity.

Keywords: midwife, witch, feminism, women's medicine, birth

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Foreword

This thesis explores the literary association between the midwife and the witch in Ami McKay's *The Birth House* and how this association is historically grounded in the evolution of gynaecology as well as the masculinization and professionalization of medicine. In her novel, Ami McKay adopts the midwife-witch as both a symbol of feminine[1] oppression and transcendence of a limited feminine condition. I adopt a historical approach to argue that the protagonist's story illustrates the belittlement of female medical knowledge through accusations of witchcraft. My work states that the field of obstetrics has a history of oppressing midwives, who have long been subjected to discrimination and legal repercussions for doing their work. This oppression was justified under the belief that midwives and female lay healers were less qualified than their male counterparts to assist with live births. In an effort to discredit the woman healer, the myth of the midwife-witch spread throughout Medieval Europe and subsequently made its way to the new world. This myth is implicit in McKay's novel, as her main characters, Dora and Miss Babineau, both incarnate the figure of the midwife-witch. She inverts the negative association of these characters by making them the heroes of the story, telling a fictional history in which the witch can be celebrated.

Indeed, in contemporary times, the witch, a rebellious female figure, is a feminist icon of sorts in the popular imaginary. It can be said that she is a feminist hero, and has enjoyed a resurgence in the age of digital media and feminist campaigns, from Me Too,

[1] While I am sensitive to the construction of femininity and gender performance, due to the lack of queer characters (outside of Judith and Rachael (325)), this thesis will analyze womanhood and femininity as they are represented in McKay's heteronormative textual construction. However, I recognize that womanhood is a flexible concept that includes trans women, and gender-nonconforming folk who adopt the label. Similarly, witches, who are not limited to cisgender women in their contemporary representations, are gendered in this thesis as they are in the novel.

through the body positivity movement and to Hillary Clinton's political campaign. In contemporary feminist circles, to be a witch is to have agency when it comes to feminine identity, reality, and power. Ami McKay favours this archetypal figure in many of her works, including *The Witches of New York*, and *Half Spent was the Night*. *The Birth House*, however, is her only story in which the witch is also a midwife, grounding her fictional characters in a rich history and cultural tradition of healing[2]. In this novel, Ami McKay adopts the midwife-witch as both a symbol of feminine oppression and of transcendence of this oppression[3]. I adopt a historical approach to argue that writing witchy characters allows McKay to explore the alienation of strong, independent female characters while giving them a unique source of strength: magick.

I use the term magick as it conceptualized in contemporary, feminist Wicca: as a divine power that all women have access to through their ability to create life. The spelling variations between 'magick' and 'magic' serves to distinguish the former from the concepts of 'magic' as it was understood during the European Witch Trials—the menacing, supernatural power of a monstrous witch[4]—a concept that has been rigorously studied by scholars of anthropology, history, and religion. In fact, much of the ways we understand magic comes from a religious lens: as a precursor to religious belief (Gager 293), as a continuation of religious belief (ibid) or as an intrinsic part of this belief,

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[2] *The Birth House* was inspired by McKay's ancestor, a female doctor, and the history of her family home in Nova Scotia, which once served as a birth house. McKay's personal website is a testimony to her interest in history, feminism, witchcraft, and women's medicine. She offers a behind the scenes look on all of her novels as a way to satisfy curious readers by providing a sneak-peak into the influences and intertextuality in her work. She explains the research process behind her novels as an exploration of family history through letters, archives, and interviews. For more on McKay's inspiration, see McKay July 2011, August 2011, October 2011, July 2016, September 2016.

[3] As feminism's influence has grown with phenomena such as the *Me Too* campaign, "Save Planned Parenthood", and the body positivity movement, midwifery has been reconstructed as a valid choice in terms of bodily autonomy and traditional healing. This is further developed on page 45.

[4] For more on the construction of feminine monstrosity in relation to witchcraft and female power, see Doyle, 2019.

(Gager 295) thus an incarnation of the divine. Magic is action-based, aided by the power of "spirits or even gods" (Mauss 26) to whom the magician[5] must often obey. This relationship grants the magician an upper hand on his fellow man, for he has access to a power unattainable to others, overshadowing their human strength, intelligence or ability. However, magic can be difficult to define since it "is an institution only in the most weak sense; it is a kind of totality of actions and beliefs, poorly defined, poorly organized even as far as those who practice it and believe in it are concerned" (Mauss 13). Magick, as it explored in popular feminist works and contemporary pagan witchcraft, has an almost spiritual quality in the sense that it is a force beyond one's body. It is fed by what some like to call "the divine feminine"[6], a transcendental and transgenerational experience of womanhood that connects all women, alive and dead, through time and space; also called "the feminine side of god"[7]. While both have an element of the divine, magick is linked to gender, it is an embodied experience of the divine that the witch masters, rather than a power purely outside of one's self obtained through exchange, that can be taken back at any point if the magician refuses to perform a spirit's biddings.

Other academic works have studied this novel under the scope of ecofeminism, transnational feminism, and geographies of care[8] and while they provide a solid platform of analysis, I believe that a multidisciplinary approach, combining history, politics, and literary feminism[9] is essential to understanding the cultural value of the text. *The Birth*

[5] In the sense of a practitioner of magic
[6] For more on the divine feminine, see Hutton, 2019
[7] Also described as preChristian primordial Goddesses, see Greenwood, 2013
[8] See Hétu, 2015, 2017; Kellar Pinard, 2019; Mintz, 2013; Yap G. H., 2012.
[9] While I acknowledge that it can be problematic to see motherhood as a source of empowerment because not all women are mothers (or can be) and not all mothers have children out of choice, I focus on birth and motherhood as they are enabled by Dora's midwifery. McKay's work can be analyzed as a perpetuation of the shortcomings of second-wave feminism by failing to address the privilege of working out of purpose-seeking rather than survival. Also, the novel lacks intersectionality in regards to race. What's more, I use

House, as a piece of popular fiction, strongly engages in a dialogue with North American culture and influences popular culture in return, and I anticipate this influence will grow with its upcoming television adaptation (van Koeverden 2019). I explore how McKay uses fiction as a space through which to fill in the gaps left by male historians, to create new stories from the fragments left behind and to supply alternate stories inspired by life-writing and personal accounts. In McKay's case, these stories are also a work of reimagining her family history, placing her ancestor, a female doctor in the late 19th century[10] in her heritage home, which served as a Birth House to a Nova Scotian community. This strong personal influence calls for a cultural as well as literary analysis of the text in order to better understand the richness of the text's value within literary as well as English studies.

I argue that McKay's novel grounds the struggle between male and female power by fictionalizing the question of how patriarchal constructions of witchcraft influenced the process of excluding women from medicine in the goal of finding the innate power of the feminine body and the agency in knowing this body physiologically. The first chapter traces the story of the masculinization and medicalization of birth that enabled male dominance in the last woman-led frontier: the female body, where feminine knowledge was superior, a space for the taking with economic and political promise. I look into how lay healers and midwives were pushed out of their own practice as communities transitioned from herbal and belief-based healing to science. To do so, I look to the fictional character of the midwife-witch and the mythology that rose her up from a simple

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feminist theory as it is explored in contemporary–not always academic–reflections on the topic of the witch. 'Magick', as defined in this thesis, is less about choosing to be a mother, but the power in the possibility to create life.

[10] For more on the author's inspiration, see McKay, August 2011, July 2011.

healer to the powerful witch. The second chapter examines the archetype of the witch and how belief in this fictional character led to the death of thousands of 'normal' women due to superstitions against women's intuition and knowledge, misunderstandings of their bodies, as well as the fear of independent, free-thinking women. Lastly, the third chapter conceptualizes bodily autonomy under the threat of religion, medicine, and law to better understand how body-centered patriarchal oppression impacts cultural reproductions of birth and midwifery. I argue that the midwife-witch and her associations to birth and abortion afford her the ability to engage with politically controversial issues within the literary space to reclaim agency through identification with the archetype of the witch.

Introducing *The Birth House*

Ami McKay's debut novel is set in World War 1-era Scots Bay, a coastal town in Nova Scotia she uses to bring into question the role of traditions in feminine agency and the construction of gender roles. McKay's novel is filled with family history, women-centered community, local folklore, and the notion of legacy as a sort of magic, grounding her work in a complex, realistic representation of village life. She uses this setting to explore traditional gender roles and the rise of feminism in small-town Canada, establishing a timeline of an important shift in the agency of Women in Nova Scotia, as Dora's life transforms from being denied reading certain literary works and shipped off to the local midwife because her family believes she will never find a husband to her auto-determination as a widowed midwife who wins the trust of the women in her community. Her shift echoes the changes in opportunities for women outside of the home.

The story takes place between 1916 and 1919, a key time for the employment of women, who took traditionally male jobs to replace the workers fighting in the First World War. This setting impacts the mobility of the female characters in terms of opportunities to circumvent gender roles. In the small, traditional town, the female characters have little choice but to get married and have children. There are strongly reinforced ideals of how women should act and interact, making it all the more difficult for the protagonist to conform to her surroundings. Alternative female jobs, such as teaching or nursing, are not represented in the novel, emphasizing the little opportunity for women through the female characters. Even when women create opportunities for themselves, such as starting their own lay healing practice, male characters come into the picture, threatening their autonomy.

McKay examines the injustices of male-led women's medicine and fear-mongering in favour of hospital birth as well as the accompanying belittlement of women's knowledge through Dora's experiences as a midwife. However, the story ends with a self-actualized Dora living in Scots Bay with her daughter and her lover, her home having become a "birth house" where women of the community gather and embrace motherhood. Thus, this novel explores the changes in opportunities for women due to the rise of feminism by illustrating the contrast between the restrictive, patriarchal Scots Bay of Dora's childhood with the more free, socially progressive Boston of 1918 which inspires Dora to fight for women’s rights within her community upon her return.

Chapter 1: Women and Medicine

The key idea in the novel that led this discussion on the history of women's medicine is the process of birth itself–not only the struggle for a baby to come into the world but the struggle for male and female power in a time and place undergoing transformation. Feminism has led to so many social advancements for women that it is easy to forget that equality–as we know it today in the Western world–is the result of a little over a century of legal disputes concerning the right to vote, to equal employment, and to bodily autonomy. Of course, before feminist movements were identified as such, women still fought to varying degrees to participate in a male-dominated society. The struggle for reproductive autonomy is a fight to hold knowledge over one's own body. This struggle concerns power and advantage in the sense that a woman who knows her body can keep secrets from her husband or her father, hiding a pregnancy or an affair. Additionally, holding restricted knowledge over another person's body places the male doctor in a position of power, holding the potential to circumvent bodily autonomy.

McKay's novel looks back to World War I-era Nova Scotia in an attempt to bring to light two of these struggles: the right to agency in giving birth and the right to practice midwifery, both of which are challenged by a vilified male character: Dr. Thomas. Medicine has not always been male-dominated, although it is demonstrated as such in McKay's novel, and the harsh attitudes towards witches coincide with an important transformation in technology and authority in the medical field. While popular culture remembers herbal healers as poor, decrepit witches, history remembers midwives and lay

healers differently[11]. McKay uses historical fiction as a space to challenge contemporary popular culture by bringing the past forward in time, at once accurate in regards to its inclusion of the tensions between midwifery and medicine and creative in the liberties afforded to the portrayal of the characters at the center of the birth debate.

I argue that the exclusion of women from the practice of medicine was a long and drawn-out process with religious, political, and practical implications. At a time when both men of science and lay healers were not formally educated and most of the population remained illiterate, folklore played a large part in healing traditions, serving as the foundation for many of the medical practices and medicines we know today. Naturally, this exclusionary process specifically targeted midwives, who had privileged access to both mothers-to-be and their newborns as well as extensive knowledge about women's bodies and their reproductive systems, enabling them to provide contraceptive aid—a key factor in bodily autonomy. In particular, offering contraception is one of the main accusations against Dora, and a crime punishable by imprisonment (Mckay, 34). Understanding this history informs a more in-depth reading of the conflict between the midwives and Dr. Tomas, as well as McKay's positioning in favour of natural birth.[12]

[11] In the sense that history recognizes the variation in the skill level of these healers as well as the role of their work in building the foundation of medicine and their value in rural communities without access to other services.

[12] In the 'behind the scenes' of writing *The Birth House*, McKay speaks of her preference for home birth and her own experience giving birth to her second child at home. Her positive associations to witnessing her friends give birth at home influence how she tackles the subject in her work, as she tries to address what she calls “fear mongering” on behalf of physicians and in favour of hospital birth. See McKay, July 2011.

1.1 Masculinizing Women's Medicine

This chapter illustrates the conditions under which women practiced medicine as well as how they were treated as patients by male physicians to bring to light the injustices faced by women throughout history. I argue that while female medical practitioners were tolerated and even respected until the end of the medieval period, women were eventually pushed to the margins of medical practice. In order to gain a better understanding of the history of midwifery and how it evolved throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, Monica H. Green draws a timeline of the changes that occurred in the conception of modern-day obstetrics and gynaecology[13]. In the Middle Ages, beginning in the eleventh century, Europe underwent a transition into a culture of literature (Green 10), which ultimately resulted in what Green argues was the defining element in turning women's medicine into a masculine concern: literacy. At this time women had authority over the knowledge of their bodies (Green viii) and were respected in that authority. Shortly after, the twelfth century saw the end of a period of no legal restriction on medical practice (Green 3), where local reputation and learned experience were of mostly equal value, and learned practitioners were few and far between (Green 8). During this period, there was no concern over sex-specific doctor-patient relationships; men and women could treat any gender indiscriminately (Green 22). The thirteenth century saw no identifiable profession of midwifery, as well as a lack of distinction between men and women in terms of medical regulation (Green 15). However, some medical practitioners were still asked to defend their actions in court, such as well-

[13] This history goes back even further, with healers in ancient Greece criticized as "*magoi* and chartlands" (Gager, 294). Since my work focuses on the medieval legacy of the midwife-witch, I emphasize the medieval medical context and its evolution to present-day obstetrics.

known physician Jacoba Felicie, who was brought to trial under the argument that since women could not practice law, they should be barred from practicing medicine as well. She argued at her trial that female patients were more likely to reveal intimate complaints to other women than to male physicians, putting them at risk when examined exclusively by men (Green 15).

In the next century, specific limitations were slowly implemented in terms of licensing, excluding women from medical practice and introducing an oral exam as a part of the licensing process (Green 3-4). Beforehand, licensing laws had "egalitarian phrasing" that ignored women entirely, leaving a perceptible grey zone in which to practice (Green 14). Green also mentions that women healers were still present during birth, with surgeons and physicians only getting involved in patient care after birth (Green 287). At the tail end of the Middle Ages, licensing laws spread throughout Europe, mainly in Spain, England, France, Italy and Germany (Green 3). However, it was tolerated for women to practice basic medicine on each other and on children in England, France, and the Spanish city of Valencia (Green 15). Licensing laws emphasized literacy as a key indicator of skill levels and medical aptitude (Green 8), thus determining who could and could not become a doctor based on who had the privilege of receiving an education–typically men from an upper-class or religious background. Thus, the odd literate midwife had no medical texts written for her, relying instead on texts written for surgeons and barbers, both of whom could legally practice medicine (Green 165).

This process of excluding women from the medical field was not all male-orchestrated, however, with women participating in discrediting midwives. Michele Savonarola, who was at the forefront of defining gynaecological study, writing books for

a female audience on fertility and childcare (Green 165), asked both lay healers and midwives "to leave certain tasks to male physicians or surgeons", such as "the prescribing of medicines, surgical intervention in obstructed birth, treatment of postpartum fever" (Green 246). Thus, midwifery became increasingly hybrid in nature: by the end of the fifteenth century, the presence of surgeons or physicians at birth was "so routine as to be unworthy of special comment" (Green 287). Women who had been influential in writing medical texts, such as Trota of Salerno, a twelfth-century author-figure who was credited as the author "the leading text throughout most of Europe from the late twelfth well into the fourteenth century (and in certain areas, into the sixteenth)" (Green viii), were mentioned in passing, without being properly credited for their contributions (Green 246). By the sixteenth century, many of the texts produced in the previous century became obsolete but "had served their purpose" as "they had established the competence of book-learned men to oversee virtually all aspects of women's health, even to the point of supervising the midwife in her tasks" (Green 247).

In 1512 Europe, due to rising pressure from religious and local authorities "midwives had to swear oaths not to use magic and not to harm the infant" (Willis, 66). Deborah Willis notes that much of the link between midwives and witches reflects anxieties surrounding women's bodies and the maternal womb, and women's bodies in general (Willis 66). During this period, surgeons were the recognized experts on all things birth-related: midwives sought after male physicians and surgeons during complicated births (Green, 272-273). It was assumed by the medical community that a woman simply could not know more about gynaecology than men, despite their lived experience both in their feminine bodies and in witnessing and assisting birth (Green 3).

This century also saw the rise of the literate midwife, who despite meeting the qualifications necessary to practice medicine, was not believed to have any authority when it came to medical knowledge about anything other than uncomplicated birth (Green 248). As we moved into the seventeenth century, despite increasing hardship, women's medicine did not disappear; women made their own feminine genre of medical writing, which remained limited in both its audience and its production (Green 290). One such German woman, Justine Siegmund, suffered from abnormal uterine growth and prolapse which was recognized as such by a midwife after a physician simply assumed she was pregnant, enabling her to receive proper treatment and care for her condition. This inspired her to study midwifery and become an expert on difficult birth, in turn producing the first German-language obstetrical text written by a woman (Green 289). Two centuries later, as female physicians began practicing legally in Europe, Marie Zakrzewska, a physician and former midwife, argued that a woman such as herself had the same "rights and capacities to practice medicine as men did" (Green 289). And yet, even into the mid-twentieth century, female physicians remained few and far in between, despite increasing opportunities to attend university and study medicine.

The process of masculinizing women's medicine was not as simple and linear as one might believe. As with most events from the past, it is only in looking back on these situations that patterns emerge, as well as the desire to sort and categorize events into well-defined centuries. The periods mentioned above are an attempt to do just that, with varying degrees of success, as midwifery survived attempts to drown it out and is still alive and well today. In fact, countries that currently employ a midwife-based system to have statistically better outcomes for both mother and child (Global Health Workforce

Initiative 2013). In some recent cases, women have even been maimed by surgeon-based practices– such as symphysiotomy–that were already considered out-dated in much of the Western World at the time of the operation (Khaleeli 2014). In the contemporary literary context, McKay's novel positions itself in favour of viewing childbirth as a natural process and therefore something women need not be afraid of. She creates a space of dialogue in which modern-day obstetrical practices are symbolically represented in the medical mistakes of the past, such as the use of twilight sleep[14] and the pathologization of womanhood in the form of hysteria[15]. Pearl Feldman, an Associate Professor of Family Medicine at the University of Toronto summarizes this process of masculinizing women's medicine with the following statement:

> Historically, the healing arts were a woman's domain, and people's illnesses were cared for by women healers, nurses, witches, and traditional midwives. When the rise of scientific medicine started in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, male physicians sought to separate and distinguish themselves from traditional female healers. They did this by valuing the traditional male traits of authoritativeness, logic, and rational discourse. Later, the scientific method and evidence-based medicine became a dominant model in the practice of medicine. But the last 50 years have demonstrated that this stereotypically male approach is not necessarily what is best for patients (Feldman 276).

Essentially, by adopting midwife characters, McKay argues in favour of reproductive agency and bodily autonomy by demonstrating the power of knowing one's feminine body and helping other women do the same. If this power is strong enough to

[14] For more on twilight sleep and painless childbirth, see Hairson, 1996.
[15] For more on the history of Hysteria, see Micale, 2019.

instil fear, mistrust, and suspicion, then it is all the more important to keep within one's grasp.

Part of the social contract of becoming a mother was the ability to bring a child into the world in a socially acceptable way, giving birth is not enough to earn that title: mothers must raise their children to be productive, participating members of society. Traditionally, motherhood had been strongly connected to femininity. Women were valued for their capacities as a mother and wife. While contemporary Western society has negotiated these terms and the social contracts that trickle from them, these contracts resurface in contemporary art, especially in literature. *The Birth House* explores the key concepts of natural birth and the right to work, as Dora struggles to protect the rights of the women of the Bay as well as her own right to heal them. The novel comes at a time of anxiety surrounding the right to bodily autonomy and reproductive choice, as reflected in the rise of the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* documentaries on childbirth and midwifery, and women's marches in protest of stricter abortions laws.

Just as it can be chosen, and embraced, motherhood can be forced upon women by denying them the right to reproductive autonomy (Backhouse 62). In the past, and arguably in much of the world today, motherhood was not always a choice, and many women, who were not interested in becoming mothers, gave birth despite their intentions to end their pregnancies. Feminism has challenged the idea that the ideal woman is a mother, a wife, and daughter in the hopes of giving women a chance to define these terms for themselves, if they so choose, rather than trying to follow a prescribed set of rules and behaviours, since "Patriarchy helped to shape the terms of these quarrels: in a culture

where women's value was crucially determined by their ability to bear children and nurture others, women readily perceived their own prestige and power as dependent on their performance as mothers and domestic workers" (Willis, 39). From the right to vote to the right to property, equality and bodily autonomy, feminism has long fought for not only female independence, but for fulfillment, and for choice. As an independent woman, the witch is an ideal counter-hero (Young 5) that "contradict[s] the characteristics of the ideal woman [...] an inversion of the good woman, who embodies the categories of wife, mother, and upholder of morality" (Young 154). As such, she challenges the dominant patriarchal structures of power. She also serves as a scapegoat for tragedies such as famine and disease, which in turn reinforces male-dominated institutions such as the Catholic Church (Young 160). Hence, the witch is a figure that challenges male control, much like Dora, who rebels against her father, her husband, and moral values of sexual purity and marriage. She transgresses limiting feminine ideals by failing to play either of the roles of mother, daughter, and wife conventionally. She negotiates each role, seeking an understanding of why she cannot quite conform, despite her best efforts. Ultimately, she adapts her place of belonging in the community, finding ways to be a daughter to her mother and Miss Babineau, a life companion to Hart, and a mother to Wrennie. This adaptation of her responsibilities extends to her profession, as she attempts to serve her community despite the death of her mentor, the disapproval of her husband, and rising threats of Dr. Thomas.

1.2: Lay Healing: A North American Perspective

Lay healers, like midwives, faced barriers to practicing their skills and sharing their knowledge. This is important in understanding the threat that Miss Babineau poses to Dr. Thomas: If she can catch babies, she takes only female patients away from him; if she can heal everyone, she can completely drive him out of business, as he also provides general medical care (McKay 17). For centuries, 'witches', in the lay healer sense of the word, were seen as suitable people to turn to for healing as well as spells to improves one's fortune or punish a rival. Medicine was highly influenced by nature, as traditional lay healers mastered the use of natural materials and herbs to make specialized teas, poultices, charms, amulets, and offerings to minimize pain, prevent infection, and heal the sick (Storl 54-55). These natural practices were later interpreted as indicators of witchcraft, and are still recommended in popular contemporary Wiccan guides, such as Arin Murphy-Hiscock's *The Green Witch: Your Complete Guide to the Natural Magic of Herbs, Flowers, Essential Oils, and More* and Judy Ann Nock's *The Modern Witchcraft Book of Natural Magick: Your Guide to Crafting Charms, Rituals, & Spells from the Natural World*. Culture also determined what was categorized as medicine or magic. For example, natural healing was deemed the norm–and still is in much of Asia, with the prestige of Chinese Traditional Medicine and Ayurveda, both of which have been incorporated into modern medical practices. In many ways, there is exists a kind of magic within medicine, an element that cannot quite be defined scientifically:

> Medicine, almost to our own days, has remained hedged in by religious and magical taboos, prayers, incantations and astrological predictions. Furthermore, a doctor's drugs and potions and a surgeon's incisions are a real

> tissue of symbolic, sympathetic, homeopathic and anti-pathetic actions which are really thought of as magical…If an activity is both magical and technical at the same time, the magical aspect is the one which fails to live up to this definition. Thus, in medical practices, words, incantations, ritual and astrological observances are magical; this is the realm of the occult and of the spirits, a world of ideas which imbues ritual movements and gestures with a special kind of effectiveness, quite different from their mechanical effectiveness. (Mauss 24- 25)

In the French-speaking regions of North America, out of necessity and familiarity, natural medicine was standard well into the beginning of the twentieth century–especially in rural areas, where plant-based knowledge and traditions were initially transmitted from Indigenous Peoples and eventually trickled down from mother to daughter (Stanley 48). In the Cajun tradition, this manifested itself as 'traiteurs', healers who combined catholic spirituality and herbalism, giving prayers and tinctures to the ill (Lanoux 19-20). For thousands of years, the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas used a mixture of herbal medicine, massage, sweat lodges, and spiritual elements to heal their sick (Roland 2015; Storl 247). A Shaman, a well-respected elder of the community, typically administered these treatments although basic remedies were known by most of the women in the community. When European settlers arrived in the sixteenth century, they brought with them barber-surgeons who were ill-equipped to handle serious injuries, internal medicine, and pharmacology. The barber-surgeon approach was different from the classical physician, who could prescribe and administer medicines; the surgeons, who could operate and the apothecaries, would prepare and sell medicines. This lack of qualified

medical practitioners in the new colonies created a space for women to practice medicine. From 1650-1850, "Much of the medical care was provided by women, and Catholic colonies had a distinct advantage because of the various female religious orders that deemed it their sacred duty to treat both settler and Indigenous populations" (Stanley 47). Additionally, the colony of Quebec had official, professionally trained midwives who acted as employees of the state and witnesses at court proceedings (Stanley 49). In British colonies, trained British midwives were brought in to meet the needs of the colony. By the end of this period, both Montreal and Quebec City had Catholic-church approved, licensed midwives (Stanley 50). Unlicensed midwives, however, still treated patients regardless of licensing laws. In Atlantic Canada, midwives had to obtain special certification to be recognized by the governments of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (ibid).

Due to a lack of available maternal care in North America at the end of the nineteenth century[16], which led to the creation of the Victorian Order of Nurses, pregnant women who were meant to be treated by doctors were being seen by nurses instead, who took on the role of the midwife. Out of physician scarcity, these nurses had to operate in a legal grey zone to treat their patients (Stanley 51). By the beginning of the twentieth century, midwives operated in the same grey zone in much of the country, with no definitive laws against their practice (ibid). However, legislation could be used to bring these women to court and grey zones were eventually eliminated by laws that "forbade the practice of alternative, 'quack' practitioners, including independent nurses and midwives, apothecaries, and blacksmiths" while protecting new medical men with

[16] This brings to question the prioritization of funding and allocation of resources by the medical institution.

"superior knowledge" (Stanley 28). The Canadian Government later published the *Canadian Mother's Book* as an attempt to help women in rural areas with little to no medical access give birth on their own (Stanley, 54). This book was "an attempt to provide women with some kind of medical advice and service without resorting to the employment of district midwives" (ibid), whom the authors believed were less capable than women left to their own devices. The process of becoming a qualified midwife was not straightforward either. Women were banned from medical schools in the majority of North America for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries[17] (Burtch 80). In fact, Canada didn't see its first licensed female doctor until the 1875 arrival of Dr. Jennie Kidd Trout, who was educated in the United States and later founded the Kingston Women's Medical College in 1883 (Phillips 2017). Almost ten years later, the Criminal Code of 1892 disallowed the sale and advertisement of birth control in Canada, severely limiting female bodily autonomy (Canadian Public Health Association). Within the same century, women were barred from attending birth at any capacity except as an aid to a male physician, prevented from attending higher education to gain medical knowledge, and rendered unable to prevent unwanted pregnancy. Hence, the law is very much intertwined with the rise of the male physician in the sense that it was utilized as a tool to limit the ability of women to practice midwifery and to offer repercussions to those who dared to practice regardless. Nonetheless, smear campaigns against midwifery did little to squash the demand for midwives, who were still employed in rural communities well into the twentieth century.[18]

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[17] Women were banned by the simple fact of their gender. Even in 2018 Tokyo, and elsewhere around the world, access to medical school is still safeguarded by today's patriarchal society. See McCurry, 2018.

[18] My great grandmother gave birth to all her children at home, with the help of fellow women in rural, Appalachian Quebec in the 1920-1940s. In the early 1960s, my grandmother gave birth to her first two

Ami McKay's novel not only highlights the physician movement in retaliation of the "midwife problem" (McKay 2018), it sprinkles in superstition to play with the notion of the witches and witch-hunts. She incorporates elements from Atlantic Canadian tradition, such as the Acadian/Cajun 'traiteur', a character embodied by Miss Babineau and her ancestor, Louis Faire LeBlanc (McKay 25). This character is connected to Dora Rare, who is of Scottish and protestant decent, through the more culturally relevant character of the witch (McKay 68). Historically, Scottish women were executed from witchcraft accusations at a rate five times higher than the European average (Goodare 302). In the field of witchcraft studies and the history of medicine, the concept of the midwife-witch, which was once accepted without question, has been extensively criticized by contemporary historians such as David Harley. He argues that the myth of the midwife-witch is as prevalent as the myth that midwives were poor, illiterate, and disrespected (Harley 2). In reality, midwives frequently appeared in court as expert witnesses in cases of rape, bastardy, and infanticide due to their extensive knowledge of the female reproductive system (Harley 4). They also determined paternity, and midwives appointed by the church even performed baptisms (Burtch 73). If midwives were seen with suspicion, so were most workers involved in "all those trades associated with food preparation or magical medicine" (Harley 5), although there are very few examples of midwives accused of witchcraft, much less brought to trial and executed. One such case in 1660 involved a midwife who was accused of murdering her patient by performing a botched abortion. She faced the death penalty for her crimes. The surgeon who had actually performed the procedure, however, did not lose his life (Harley 7). While

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children in the same home, with the help of the local physician. This physician served a number of villages since there simply was not a hospital within reasonable distance.

midwives, were not equal in knowledge or skill due to a lack of standardization (Harley 8), neither were doctors, and most urban midwives were "affluent, literate, and respectable" (Harley 11). Still, the rise in popularity of the *Malleus Maleficarum* spread the figure of the midwife-witch throughout the continent long after the end of the European Witch Trials. These Europeans, who witnessed the trials and subsequent executions, then brought their beliefs with them to the 'New World'.

As opposed to medicine, which was a reputable profession, midwifery was first and foremost a skill acquired through experience (Harley 12). This differentiation in terms of public perception explains the hierarchy between occupations. Harley notes that midwives who were accused of witchcraft, called 'maleficium', a "destructive magic, wanting to cause harm" had more likely failed their patients (Harley 9) and that midwives were "accused of technical ineptitude" rather than real witchcraft (Harley 13). However, there are some conflicting accounts on whether or not midwives were accused of witchcraft in reality. For example, in Thomas Forbes' works, he mentions that Hiltprandt's textbook of midwifery claims many midwives were witches, women barred from practice due to accusations of witchcraft in England in 1661 and 1677 and later reinstated (Forbes 117). While Forbes' text appears after Harley's, it highlights the varying beliefs on the matter of the midwife-witch, a figure that persists in academic literature as well as works of fiction. He explains this by arguing that historians are too quick to confuse domestic sorcery with so-called "maleficent witches" (Harley 8). Domestic sorcery here likely refers to baking, steeping tea, and performing little superstitious rituals around the home, like tying lavender around the bedpost and putting an axe under the bed before the arrival of a baby (McKay 64). At the time, there was little

difference between folklore and fact, and village tales filled the gaps in medical knowledge. For example, it was believed that fairies would steal an unbaptized baby and leave a changeling, "a soulless and misshapen child of the fairies, in the human baby's place" (Forbes 128). These tales explained congenital defects in newborns as well as high rates of child mortality as most communities believed changelings could not live into adulthood. Many of these beliefs persist in rural communities throughout the world. According to Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, as well as Monica Green, midwives and lay healers were gradually pushed out of healing practices through the process of standardization and masculinization (Ehrenreich and English 11). Scholars have since criticized the duo for conducting only a partial reading of the evidence they presented, highly favouring the narrative of the poor, capable woman pushed out of her vocation out of greed and/or misogyny (Willis 5n6). Despite the criticism, their book has been republished in 2010, over 35 years after its launch, and continues to circulate in New Age shops and Feminist bookstores around Canada. It endures as an important reference in popular media, gender studies, and within literary circles.

1.3 Obstetrics: Modernization of Midwifery

McKay's portrayal shows an exclusively positive side of midwifery; her characters are without fault when it comes to the bad outcomes of their patients. This creative choice serves to construct a positive image of the witch as well as vilifying Dr.Thomas. While Dr. Thomas' arrogance nearly costs the life of one of his patients and causes an unwanted experience for another, Dora and Miss Babineau are both constructed as knowledgeable and medically skilled. When their patients' lives come to an end, it is

due to circumstances beyond their control, such as Experience Ketch drinking all the beaver brew in one shot without rest, her baby's premature birth as well as her 14-year-old daughter's history of sexual abuse. In contrast, Dr. Thomas' patients either do not remember their birthing experience due to the drugs he uses during the process, or they nearly lose their life due to his negligence and poor patient care. His patients are saved thanks to interventions done by village midwives, even though they cannot always save both mother and child. When death occurs, the midwives treat the deceased with attentive care and diligence. While he is more formally trained than the midwives, the doctor is motivated by greed rather than the pure desire to help his patients. When they are unable to pay for his services (McKay 17), he relies on the charitable funds of the community rather than donate his time and resources to help women in need. What's more, due to its location, the maternity home he opens is not very accessible to the women: a physical manifestation of his unconscious–or maybe conscious–desire for his patients to come to him, to adopt the methods that are easier for him, and to recognize his authority.

These contrasting approaches in patient care stand in for the classic conflict of modernization versus the old world the characters have always known. McKay adds a feminist twist in the form of Dora's trip to Boston and the influence of her suffragette friend, Maxine. Her novel reads like a coming-of-age story of a young woman punished for her intelligence, independence, and natural curiosity only to be sent away to live with Miss Babineau, an almost supernatural figure of the old world–kin to the earth. It is through the character of Miss Babineau that Dora finds her roots as a member of a progressive sisterhood of women, a coven of sorts where she can openly discuss remedies and contraception as well as receive help in her midwifery practice. She gains knowledge

about her own body through attending the births of the women of The Bay and her natural curiosity is nurtured and encouraged by her mentor. Despite Miss Babineau's support and genuine affection, like the other women of the Bay, Dora is cautiously intrigued by Dr. Thomas' practice and insistence and spiel on modern medicine, contemporary scientific thought, and the 'civilized' way of giving birth. She respects Miss Babineau's traditions and knowledge, yet she questions whether or not it is finally time for the midwife to let someone else care for her community. Influenced by her abusive husband, Dora eventually gives up midwifery (McKay 171) and even consults with the doctor in the hopes of finding the cause of her infertility (McKay, 193-197). Once he diagnoses her with hysteria caused by her exposure to midwifery, she takes his prescribed treatment into her own hands, an indication of her mistrust of and discomfort with the "good doctor" (McKay 201).

The small, isolated town of Scots Bay is in evolution: science is perceived as a marker of civilization and progress, placing Dr. Thomas on the side of 'truth', innovation, and futurity, especially in the matter of women's medicine. He is professionally trained and confident in his abilities, and he knows how to sell himself to the community, both the women and the men. The doctor manipulates men in two ways: enticing them to recognize male superior knowledge and capitalizing on their shame of wanting to provide the best care for their wives. It does not appear that Dr. Thomas' initial interactions with Miss Babineau are intentionally disrespectful or deceitful. He seems to genuinely feel that he is doing a service to the community and that Miss Babineau is unable to provide the same level of care to the women of The Bay. While he may be financially motivated, he seems to perceive this to the be the case with others as well, projecting his focus on

compensation onto Miss Babineau by offering to pay her a sum for each woman she brings to the Canning Maternity Center (McKay 29-30). All the while, he seems to flaunt his financial success. When he cannot get the old midwife on his side, he begins a smear campaign against her. Despite Dr. Thomas' indications of the contrary, Miss Babineau's methods are sanitary. She washes her hands several times before checking her patient's womb and uses clean water and supplies during her interventions (McKay 11). This leads to the high survival rate of her patients, much like her real-life counterparts (Storl 258). Her experience, combined with her inherited knowledge, is ultimately what enables her to do so much good for her patients. More importantly, unlike her male rival, she listens to her patients, extracting a detailed patient history, which she can then utilize to predict obstacles and guide both mother and child through them.

The novel highlights the very real tensions that existed between doctors and midwives in the early twentieth century: Dr. Thomas believes that women's intuition and herbal remedies have "served in the place of science too long" (McKay 29). He epitomizes the belief in offering a "pain-free birth" (McKay 29) over a natural birthing experience, selling men and women on the idea of happiness as a "clean, safe birth" in "comfort" (McKay 31). He believes that doctors such as himself are the only ones who can provide such a birthing experience and that anything short of his expertise puts women at risk. This contrasts the homely, natural, and faith-based approach of Miss B, as Dr. Thomas believes that "a woman can rely on more than faith to see through the grave dangers of childbirth" (McKay 32). Unlike her community, Dora does not view birth as a miracle: "It's going to happen no matter what, there's no choice in the matter [...] How a mother comes to love her child, her caring at all for this thing that's made heavy,

lopsided, and slow, this thing that made her wish she were dead [...] that's the miracle" (McKay 20). As such, birth is conceived by the villagers as a miracle, by Dora as an unstoppable fact of life, and by Dr. Thomas as a disease requiring medical interventions (Storl 257).

Midwives are not simply birth attendants, they are sexual health educators, lactation consultants, and family planning advisors. In *The Birth House*, birth control is depicted as it was viewed in the early 20th century, with risks of criminal charges associated with the use of contraception and abortion (McKay 232). What's more, as Doctor Thomas points out, consulting a midwife to assist with birth, rather than a certified doctor, was punishable under the criminal code of 1892 under the grey zone of "failing to provide reasonable assistance during childbirth" (McKay 34). Therefore, women had no legal way of preventing birth, even under situations of domestic abuse since "any means of preventing conception, even the mention of such means, [was] illegal" (McKay 233). This was not always the case, as women in the Middle Ages often resorted to infanticide and abortion as primary forms of birth control (Backhouse 65, 69).

As medicine became professionalized and masculinized, abortion, as well as the practice of folk healing, became more and more criminalized. In *The Birth House*, the Occasional Knitters Society circumvents these laws and acts as what Willis calls an

> informal village network in which women offered each other aid and advice about childcare, sickness, and other areas of domestic management [...] The aid and advice they offered each other could involve magic–midwifery, for example, include a range of magical techniques for helping ensure the safety of mother and child during the difficult time of childbirth. (Willis, 35)

While Dora and Miss Babineau do not practice 'magic' in the traditional sense of potion-making and broom-flying, their ability to come to the aid of the women of their community is fantastic in its effectiveness and successful long-term outcomes. Their ritualized healing, connection to the spirit and natural world as well as Dora's coven-like community can also be interpreted as pagan witchcraft practice.

Chapter 2: Witchcraft and Feminine Knowledge

Women were predominantly accused of witchcraft, as witchery was women's work, and female neighbours turned against each other (Willis 36). Witches are an integral part of the Western imaginary. They haunt the nightmares of children and linger in popular cultural production. The prevalence of the Medieval European Witch Trails, as well as the Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts, continues to permeate literature, culture, and politics. While these violent acts were not exclusively against women, they did disproportionately affect them. The Witch Trials haunted people on both sides: the accusers and the accused. The accused faced the possibility of being hung or burned at the stake while the accusers either believed that they had been targeted by a witch acting upon the will of the devil or used the accusation for their personal or economic benefit. Worse yet, accusing someone of witchcraft did not ensure immunity from future accusations. In fact, it was common practice to ask the accused if they had engaged in witchcraft with other members of the community. This allowed old rivals to seek revenge by naming others as co-conspirators, or as the source of their initial bewitchment.

While witches have existed in folklore from the dawn of humanity, their roles within communities evolved from shamans, medicine women, and wise women to the religion-focused devil-worshippers of the Middle Ages. Nowadays, the witch is most often demonized by popular media: from the sadistic witches of *American Horror Story: Coven* to the evil sea witch in *The Little Mermaid,* there is an overwhelming amount of witch characters with an evil agenda. Although more positive representations of witches also exist, such as the *Wizard of Oz*'s Glenda the Good Witch of the South or *Harry Potter*'s multiple sympathetic characters, they are only a minority in a sea of dark

witches. McKay's witches, however, have feminist agenda in that they are characterized in a positive light as strong free-thinking women, despite the repeated attacks on their character by morally questionable community members, such as Mr. Ketch and Doctor Thomas. In doing so, McKay offers an alternative narrative to the fantastic witch by creating characters grounded in reality–characters who are human rather than supernatural. Instead of seeing the witch as a woman with magical abilities bestowed upon them by a supernatural male entity, her characters find their powers in their womanhood, their intergenerational knowledge, and their ancestry.

2.1 Historical Perceptions of the Witch

In order to better contextualize the legacy of the witch and her significance in McKay's work, it is important to understand the rich and complex history behind this famous figure. Witches were a 'real' threat to society in the sense that belief in witchcraft impacted daily life across all social classes. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the witch as such: "A woman thought to have magic powers, especially evil ones, popularly depicted as wearing a black cloak and pointed hat and flying on a broomstick", "A follower or practitioner of Wicca or of modern witchcraft", "An ugly or unpleasant woman", and "A girl or woman who is bewitchingly attractive." (Lexico 1) These definitions highlight the witch's characteristics as at once magical, obscene, dangerous, and seductive. According to Thomas Forbes, a witch is a "person believed to be in league with the devil and to practice black magic. By this criterion, there were witches aplenty”

(Forbes 117). Before the *Malleus Maleficarum*[19], the term 'witch' could designate a man or a woman, evil or kind, who practiced sorcery. According to David Nash, male magicians were even celebrated in some European courts (Nash 13). In Medieval Europe, as witchcraft belief spread through works such as the *Malleus*, witches became increasingly female and demonic in nature (Nash 19). It was believed that the devil could take the shape of a man and trick women into becoming witches by consorting with them (Nash 19). Women were carriers of Eve's original sin, and therefore more susceptible to the "evil and machination of the Devil" (Nash 20). In the fourteenth century, witches were simply suspected of harming others (Nash 17). This evolved into a full-blown witch-hunt by the fifteenth century. When European settlers colonized North America, they brought their beliefs and their legal system with them, resulting in a handful of witchcraft-related trials (Pelchat 2016). Since this colonization occurred towards the end of the European witch craze, it can be estimated that thousands[20] of North American women were spared from the fate of their European sisters.

The European Witch Trials were about "exposing the witch's vulnerabilities and limits, making the witch the object of his surveillance and control, relegating the witch to a subordinate role, making her powers purely derivative" (Willis 157). The trials exposed the personal lives of these women, opening them up to the scrutiny of their community, where their family history and the preconceived judgments of their neighbours dictated their fate. Hence, matters of folklore and rumours became fatal because the witch's

[19] *The Malleus Maleficarum* was by far the most influential book against witches and witchcraft practice. It affirmed that witches were more likely women and that they must be brought to justice as to not morally corrupt society. It also described in detail the activities of witches and the theological reasons to destroy them, inspiring many other 'scientific' texts against witchcraft. For more on the *Malleus*, see Kors, chapter six: A Hammer of Witches.

[20] It is estimated that between 200,000-500,000 women were executed during the European Witch Trials (Ben-Yehuda 1), compared to the 14 women (out of 20 total victims) executed in Salem. For more on the Salem trials, see Baker, 2016.

perceived power could not be controlled: "The witch or witch-like woman is one who can make the adult male feel he has been turned back into a child again, vulnerable to a mother's malevolent power" (Willis, 6). Hence, the belief in witches shifted the patriarchal dynamics of power in favour of women.

The misunderstanding of physiology and women's medicine that led to the rise of the figure of the midwife-witch were merely symptoms of how the popular imaginary and folklore influence popular opinion. For one, it was believed that the midwife who arrived on the site of a birth too quickly could have only done so by traveling on a broomstick (Forbes 117). Similarly, midwives were vulnerable to the threat of witches, who were believed to be on the hunt for newborns from whom to make their night-flying balm, the source of their ability to travel by broomstick (Forbes 119). Additionally, midwives were prone to accusations due to the logical link between the need for newborn, unbaptized children for use in witchcraft and the access midwives had to the babies witches needed to exercise their spells. As such, midwives often traveled in groups at night to protect themselves (Forbes 118). Hence, midwives and non-midwives alike were at the imaginary risk of being targeted by a witch and the real risk being accused of witchcraft. This link between midwives and witches is referenced within the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Forbes 144). While the *Malleus* was incomparable in terms of its influence on the Witch Trials, it was not until it was republished that the book and its dangerous claims spread throughout Europe (Harley 3). All in all, this influential book was edited and published 19 times in the two hundred years following its inception (Forbes 116), directly contributing to the death of hundreds of innocent women.

2.2 How Protagonists Become Witches

Superstition and misinformation are the leading causes of scapegoating and witch-hunting in the sense of "A single-minded and uncompromising campaign against a group of people with unacceptable views or behaviour" or "A campaign *against* an individual" as per the Oxford English Dictionary's definition (Lexico 2). As a small town, Scot's Bay is a rather homogenous setting in which superstition flourishes due to the fear of the unknown and unfamiliar. This partly explains some of the characters' mistrust or even their fear of Miss Babineau and her Cajun origins. This same sense of discomfort is extended to "The Women from Away"–Mabel, Bertie, and Sadie–who bring their Newfoundland traditions and ways to The Bay. Male characters are not treated with the same regard, as demonstrated by the visit of Professor Payzant (McKay 82), who brings exotic, tantalizing stories with him after his visit to New Zealand. Similarly, Doctor Gilbert Thomas, who opens a maternity home in the larger town of Canning, is perceived as a bringer of progress and modernization. This combination of mistrust of and suspicion against women is not limited to strangers or people from out of town: Dora Rare, whose family has lived in the Bay for generations, is ostracized due to the mysterious circumstances surrounding her birth and her lineage. While the 'witches' are met with some mistrust and misunderstanding, they participate in village life by tending to the health and wellbeing of other women. These women are married to men of the Bay and have children, unlike Miss Babineau, who remains celibate and childless, and Dora, whose marriage ends in widowhood and leaves her childless for most of the novel, eventually adopting a newborn Wrennie. In this sense, Dora and Miss Babineau are

perceived as outsiders because they do not perform their womanhood in the way they are expected to[21].

An outsider of Cajun heritage, Miss B. embodies an 'other' who threatens the community's stability because of her culture and healing ability, which the community sees as a manifestation of magic and witchcraft. Only other outsiders, such as Dora and the "women from away" embrace her. In many ways, Miss B. acts more like a "medicine woman" or "witch-doctor," which Ronald Hutton prefers to call a "service magician" (Hutton xi) than the devilish figure popularized during the Middle Ages. While Miss Babineau is openly accused of being a witch, Dora's case is a little more complicated. In Atlantic Canada, witches are almost most often outsiders, women who moved to the area through marriage or circumstances. In some communities, "Natives of the place could not be considered witches at all" (Rieti, 24) and in the communities studied in documented accounts stored at *Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive* and reviewed by Barbara Rieti, it was noted that "most settlements have some old lady who was looked upon to be a witch" (Rieti 16). In this sense, perhaps a witch is a role meant to be filled in these superstitious communities

> it's just a matter of a member of the community standing to claim this role and title, if it benefits them. Midwives are natural for the role, as the biblical sense of the word *witch*[22]*,* in an early translation of Exodus, refers to Egyptian midwives who saved the newborn sons of the Jews. (Skott-Myrhe 27)

[21] For more on gender performance, see Migdalek, 2015
[22] Italicized in the original text

In Scots' Bay, the common belief is that midwives and witches are interconnected, "Never break bread with midwives or witches, you'll soon crawl with boils, hives, and itches" (McKay 24).

Witching happens between people, it is not an expression of "diabolical or divine aid" (Rieti 71). In small towns where gossip is prevalent and everybody knows each other's business, all it takes is a little bad blood to turn friendly competition between women into something more sinister:

> While neighbourly cooperation made mutual survival possible, neighbourly disagreements of many sorts and competition over everything from local office holding to seating in church regularly provoked insults, quarrels, brawls, lawsuits, hurt feelings [...] to improve one's standing in the community required constant exertion. (Willis 39)

Older women, such as Miss Babineau, were historically more prone to accusations of witchcraft because of their age and circumstances and how these limited their ability to participate in kinds of exchanges "that made for good relations" with their neighbours (Willis 43). Instead, accusing them of witchcraft was one way of eliminating community members who relied on others to survive, unable to offer anything in exchange or seen as different and having knowledge unknown to most. In Miss Babineau's case, she was able to exchange her services for the help she received, but was still deemed expendable by those who did not need or understand her services, such as the men of the Bay. What's more, Miss Babineau did not rely on men to survive, challenging their importance as superior providers. While refusing a witch's requests or needs brought a fear of retaliation (Willis 65), this fear was mostly eliminated when Dr. Thomas came to The

Bay, allowing Miss Babineau to be fully ostracized, since she could be softly pushed out of the community by cutting her patient supply. What's more, Dora's marriage and her new husband's disapproval of her midwifery practice ensured that she would likely conform to the role of the dutiful wife once Miss Babineau ceased healing others, thus ensuring the end of the town's "midwife problem".

Dora's character highlights the superstitions in Scots Bay, by virtue of her birth and her family history. Her origins are almost mythological, from her caul[23] to her gender, being the first daughter born to a family "of a thousand sons" (McKay 3). The people of the Bay believed she has been changed by fairies, exchanged for a changeling, “a soulless and misshapen child of the fairies, in the human baby’s place” (Forbes 128) because of these unusual circumstances (McKay 5). In her town, "when there's no good explanation for something, people of the Bay find it easier to believe in mermaids and moss babies, to call it witchery and be done with it" (McKay 5). As Thomas Forbes explains: "superstition may be briefly and incompletely defined as unreasoning and unquestioning belief in some aspect of the natural or the supernatural" (Forbes vii). The mythology around Dora's family origins is rooted in the intergenerational curse of solely bearing male children. Dora is the first girl to come to the family in centuries, and she was born with a caul that supposedly allows her to talk to animals, see people's deaths and hear the whispering of the spirits (McKay 5), “for strong magic and strange beliefs were once related to the caul” (Forbes 95), which was said to change colour when its owner died (Forbes 96). It was also believed to provide "powers of clairvoyance, protection against sorcery, evil spirits, demons and against a witch or fairy and [could be]

[23] A caul is a foetal membrane, typically from the burst amniotic sac, that remains on an infant's head during birth. It is a rare birthing event and was interpreted through folklore as a divine sign or token of luck.

swapped for [a] changeling" (Forbes 100). Her community sees her as an anomaly, a scapegoat for the strange happenings around town, such as the birth of an albino calf (McKay 5).

Lucky for her, the community's relationship with witchcraft is not as predominant or as impassioned as in Medieval Europe. In 20th-century Nova Scotia, Dora and Miss Babineau are made to be outsiders and are feared from afar but remembered by the women who need them. With the exception of the women from away, who embrace both women with open arms and forge a true friendship with Dora, the community of Scot's Bay is wary of the women but never seeks to cause them harm, only inconveniences. However, when things go wrong, such as Experience Ketch's death after a herbal abortion, the men begin accusing Dora of witchcraft, saying that she "brings death to everything she touches," and had been "putting the witchery on [..] cattle" (McKay 291). The community blames her, believing that she had always been "a strange girl" whose fate was sealed when her mother sent her away to live with Miss Babineau, stating "it only made things worse, her mother letting her live with that witch" (McKay 291). Victims of witchcraft accusation are predetermined in a sense, "the worrisome parties, in other words, are made into witches before an encounter ever takes place" (Rieti 44). That is to say that people who are othered[24] by their community were more likely to be suspected of witchcraft or used as a scapegoat due to their expendability. It is clear that Dora's strangeness makes her predisposed to such accusations, especially in such a small and isolated place where it is "as if we might cast a spell of sameness to keep the rest of the world away" (McKay 22).

[24] For more on gendered otherness in the form of witches, see Wood, 2016

2.3 The Witch: A Positive Symbol

Ami McKay's portrayal of witches in *The Birth House* is mostly positive, characterizing Dora and Miss Babineau as caring, kind, and knowledgeable midwives who want nothing more than to help the women of the community. While these characterization choices may be read as unfeminist since they perpetuate the figure of the domesticated woman[25], McKay uses classically feminine traits in a positive light, emphasizing their use in caregiving and community-building rather than seeing them as limiting social norms. Here the feminine is embraced unapologetically as complimentary to agency, rebellion, and personal power rather than hindering feminine auto-determination as self-actualization. If 'bad' witches are accused of infanticide and bringing harm to their neighbours and community women, 'good' witches are perceived as bringers of healing, luck, and good fortune to their communities. In this sense, Miss Babineau and Dora are prime examples of 'good witches'. This is made evident when Mrs. Ketch's protests against seeing her dying newborn or resting after her difficult birth are met with kindness and compassion from both women (McKay 13). What's more, the religious Miss Babineau helps Aunt Fran when she seeks the midwife's help in inducing a miscarriage, aborting the product of her affair with the town priest (McKay 101). Instead of judging these women, the midwives are empathetic and compassionate, helping whatever women they can, even if it means going against the teachings of the church. They seek to help rather than destroy, to heal rather than harm, and to teach their fellow women about their bodies so that they may be empowered to make their own decisions. Dora and Miss Babineau practice magick in the sense that they use their knowledge to

[25] Here I refer to the figure of the ideal mother, docile and obedient, ready to fulfill her husband's and her children's needs at the expense of her own.

heal those who seek them out. Dora also volunteers her skills and knowledge during the Halifax explosion (McKay 212) and the Boston influenza epidemic (McKay 326). Despite taunts by the community and severe threats from Dr. Thomas, Miss Babineau never attempts to harm him or seek out retaliation. Instead, she stays firm in the face of his overt and covert threats and attempts to push her out of midwifery when he convinces the community that her practices are outdated and even dangerous. Contrarily, Dora initially lives by the rules, even if she questions the limitation imposed upon her because of her sex, from the books she reads to how to navigate her relationships with her brothers.

These rumours spread throughout Scots Bay, but the community remained divided when it came to the supposed malice of these characters: "Some say she's a witch, others say she's an angel" (McKay 7). Both are subjected to schoolyard songs accusing them of witchcraft and murder, such as "*Dora ate bat soup, Dora slit the devil's throat and flew over the chicken coop*[26]" (McKay 6), but neither engage in magical[27] activity. Dora has had her fair share of witchcraft allegations since her birth, but the fate of her social standing in the community is further cemented when she moves into Miss Babineau's home and begins her midwifery apprenticeship, prompting rumours that Miss Babineau is finally turning her into a witch (McKay 96), as it was believed that unmarried women who spent too much time with the midwife would start to develop a "witch's mark" (McKay 252).

For her part, Miss Babineau is largely ostracized by the community, only visited when someone requires help or healing or expresses their gratitude for her help by

[26] Italicized in the source material
[27] In the sense of 'magic' as defined on p.2

leaving her produce and homemade goods. In contrast, Dora has a loving family, which makes her less dangerous or suspicious in the eyes of the community. This also allows her to interact with the townspeople during social events, allowing her neighbours and classmates an opportunity to get to know her and to disprove some of their reservations about her. Miss Babineau's social connections, on the other hand, are limited to Dora, who has visited her with offerings every week since her birth (McKay 23), and the Widow Bigelow, a fellow Acadian woman who remains friendly with her due to their shared language. Hence, despite both women being characterized 'good witches', Miss Babineau inspires more mistrust due to her lack of networking and social acceptability.

These notable differences are characteristic of the town's shift from superstition to reason. Miss Babineau is open to Dora about her dreams, her experiences with ghosts, and her unconventional religious beliefs. Dora, on the other hand, is much more aligned with the traditions of the community. She was raised in The Bay and belongs with its people and culture. This makes her less threatening, as she has the benefit of her family's reputation to back her up, from Aunt Fran's involvement in the church and the *White Rose Temperance Society* to her mother's loyalty to her husband and family. This partly impacts the community's embrace of Dora when she opens her Birth House on Spider Hill. Rather than being stuck in the old ways, Dora is open to change, innovation, and social justice. Her resistance occurs not through her isolation, as was the case with Miss Babineau, but through her ability to blend in with the community and gain the trust of some of the women, which proves to be crucial after Experience Ketch's death.

While Dora and Miss Babineau are accused of being witches, they are not engaged in 'magic'[28] at any point in the novel. This is a deliberate choice, as McKay has written actual supernatural characters in *The Witches of New York* series. Perhaps this is a comment on the normality of the women accused of witchcraft during the Witch Trials and that the imaginary risks they presented to their communities were not truly based in anything supernatural, but rather a misunderstanding of scientific or natural phenomena. In *The Birth House,* these misunderstandings are rooted in a lack of basic physiological and biological knowledge within the community, leading its members to feel suspicious of Dora and Miss Babineau's ability to heal mothers and deliver babies. For example, the community believed that exposure to cold water led to insanity (McKay 95) and that a woman's womb could make her barren and hysterical if she was exposed to "the primitive and sometimes unseemly regenerative aspects of womanhood" by practicing midwifery (McKay 194).

Far from being supernatural, Miss Babineau's healing practices are a combination of different traditions, most coming from her Acadian ancestors and stored in her Willow Book. Additionally, some of here techniques, such as quilling–the practice of inducing sneezing to help with delivery–were learned from Chitimacha Indians (McKay 234). Her home is full of unusual ingredients and unique and interesting objects that Miss Babineau tells Dora are beyond the realm of explanation (McKay 24). Her practice is deeply rooted in her spiritual beliefs, as she reveals later in the novel that her medical supplies are gathered from the businesses of people who share her faith, insisting "It's got to come from a believer" (McKay 211). Even the herbal ingredients grown on her property and foraged from the woods involve sacred rituals believed to impact their ability to help the

[28] As defined on p.2

healing process (McKay 253). Her spiritual beliefs are used as a source of her healing feminine power, instead of a reason to shame other women, even if they conflict with her religion. Miss Babineau is not judgemental of a woman's choice not to have a child; to her, the decision is "between her and God" (McKay 102) since a "woman's gots every right to look after herself" (McKay 102). It does not protect her from being accused of witchcraft, even though her faith is typically contraindicated for witchery.

The closest thing to magic in the novel is the connection these women feel to the spirit world, using the guidance of their ancestors to care for the living and the unborn. Miss Babineau explains that the townspeople believe that "what I do ain't nothin' but a bunch of witchery, but everything gots a reason [...] It's the things *they* can't see, the things they're afraid to get an understandin' of that I gots to pass on" (McKay 70). She believes that her skills may be hard to learn and her techniques are out of the norm, but that is part of their efficacy and value. The townspeople are scared of what can make them sick, and what can kill their loved ones, but it is in understanding these illnesses that Miss Babineau can treat them. Her home, which acts as a safe space and makeshift birthing room, is surrounded by sacred land, holding Mary's garden of lost souls (McKay 18), a pure place protected from the outside world (McKay 19). It sits on the edge of the forest, where grandmothers tell of supernatural activity, "cold, secret spots, places of foxfire and spirits" (McKay 18). Children believe the woods are filled with faerie houses and gnome caves, further characterizing Miss Babineau as a living fairy tale character in the eyes of her community, at least among the children. While these stories have circulated the Bay for generations, Dora discovers that truth is stranger than fiction. Even Miss B's entry into midwifery has a mythology, as she saw her great-grandfather and St-

Brigid, Mary's midwife, in a dream, telling her all the remedies she ultimately writes in her Willow Book (McKay 26). Similarly, Dora's mother knew she was pregnant with her daughter after seeing her in a dream (McKay 70). Dora shares this supernatural ability, having been visited by the ghost of her Auntie Hannah, who came to her during church to write down her brown bread recipe (McKay 68-69). Rather than being ruled by these spirits, Dora and Miss Babineau find their power through traditional healing knowledge, and are thus masters of their own magick.

The old midwife is a staple figure within the community, even if she is ostracized and rarely recognized in her hard work. She single-handedly brought all the children of Scots Bay into the world and regularly supplies the community with tea and tinctures to heal anything from colds and menstrual pain (McKay 8). Although her healing practice involves some elements of superstitions, such as the baking of a groaning cake to help reduce the pain of childbirth (McKay 64), her process is mostly spiritual, involving prayers spoken over the instruments she uses and pleads to Mary through the process. Everything she does is coloured by her spiritual beliefs. When Dora takes on the role of the town midwife, she respects her mentor's practices and recipes without taking on the spiritual aspect to the same degree. Instead, she believes in the power of the women she treats, trusting their body's natural ability.

Chapter 3: Feminist Theory and the Feminine Body

Giving birth can be one of the most empowering, natural, and life-affirming experiences a woman can have. It is an extreme physiological process that has existed since the beginning of life itself. From humans to non-human animals, birth happens, it always has. As Dora says in the novel: "It's going to happen no matter what, there's no choice no matter" (McKay 19). So why then is birth so often treated as a disease, like something to cure, something mysterious in need of alteration or intervention? To humanity, birth serves an important purpose: it allows society to renew its population. Since new citizens are vital to the cause of growing communities, it is only normal that authorities should want to control the bodies that bring them into the world. Even today, women's bodies are subjected to laws that view them as separate from women themselves, as entities that are almost treated as public property–and in extreme cases–as a means of production. That is to say that, when it comes to reproductive autonomy, many women are denied the right to end a pregnancy or to choose permanent birth control, such as a non-medically-necessary hysterectomy. Instead, their reproductive capacity is safeguarded regardless of their desire to have children (Kirkey 2017). Still, in twenty-first-century North America, women undergoing anaesthesia are at risk of non-consensual pelvic examinations in the name of educating young doctors (Barnes 2012). Contemporary feminism challenges this body-centric conceptualization of women by fighting restrictive laws that put the life of an unborn–and sometimes non-existent–child ahead of the life of a woman, even if bringing the pregnancy to term would cause emotional or physical distress to the woman in question. *The Birth House* explores this notion briefly through Aunt Fran and Temperance's abortions (McKay 99-102, 281-5),

which are brought up as a simple fact of life rather than a moral issue, as Miss Babineau states: "Only the woman knows if she's got enough love to make a life [...] No matter what anybody says [...] only the heart knows what it's got to lose" (McKay 102). Hence, the fight for access to midwifery is interconnected with the struggle for bodily autonomy and reproductive rights: the choice of whether or not to have children is just as important as the method by which women chose to bring them into the world. I argue that the character of the witch is central to the feminist battle for reproductive rights because of the associations between the witch, the midwife, and the 'wild woman' as literary representations of feminine agency.

3.1 Claiming the Feminine Body: A Feminist Battle

The Birth House explores the limits that were imposed on women in the early twentieth century, from discouraging their pursuit of knowledge through pressuring them to marry, to encouraging them to have children with disrespectful husbands. Midwives provided a certain kind of agency to women who arguably had little knowledge in understanding their rights and the functioning of their bodies to begin with, guiding them into their personal power as they gave birth, and teaching them about their bodies before, during, and after birth. This holistic approach not only emphasized listening to their bodies, but also passed on valuable skills such as breastfeeding and basic infant care. In a way, midwives made mothers out of women while physicians turned them into patients. What's more, midwifery presented an opportunity for women to earn a living and have a positive impact on their community. Still, for the reasons mentioned above, midwives were vulnerable during the Witch Trials and in the following centuries. Part of the

connection between midwives and witches is due to fears surrounding the supposed magical uses of newborns leading to a rise in abortions. However, abortions were routinely conducted before the witch scare, with a cut-off after the "quickening," the first perceived movements of the foetus (Backhouse 65). Instead of being perceived as abortions or even contraception, the loss of a pregnancy was simply constructed as 'irregular' menstruation. Thus, medical interventions were conducted in an effort to regulate menstruation, circumventing possible pregnancy (Backhouse 69). The right to chose whether or not to bring a foetus to term is just as important as the right to choose how you decide to give birth, which Dora describes in the novel "as dear to life as breathing" (361).

The origins of the myth of the midwife-witch are still contested[29], and it is partly due to the feminist revival of the witch as a symbol of feminine power and agency. The witch was hunted for centuries in the form of witch trials, and yet the practice of witchcraft persisted. Similarly, women have been oppressed by the patriarchy since the dawn of human society, yet feminism continues to fight and make strides for women's rights and gender equality. As such, the figure of the witch has been crucial to the feminist battle for reproductive rights throughout history. 'Witch' is a loaded term: an accusation that could once turn your life around. In modern times, the term does not have the same implications, nor the same effect. Instead, it is used in a self-referential way by women who feel empowered by the feminist reimagining of the witch, based more on folklore than in history. In this conception of the witch, she represents a strong, independent woman who uses magic as a way to free herself from her situation and to

[29] For more on the myth of the midwife-witch, see Harley, 1990

transcend the limitations of her gender. In contemporary witchcraft, this magick[30] can take the form of new-age rituals involving crystals, sage, and tarot cards; acts self-care like baths; and manifestation-based meditation and visualization technique. Instead of being ruled by the affects of disgusts and terror that surround feminine bodies and their reproductive capacities, modern witches stake claim to these reactions and exaggerate them. Kathleen Skott-Myhre studies the importance of the female body in our conception of women and witches. She argues that the body, which has long been a source of limitation by belonging to someone other than the woman in question (such as her husband for example), can be turned into a threatening agent, a source of powerful agency (8, 27). To declare one's self a witch is to devalue this body in terms of social norms to claim it wholly. The witch is not only a symbol of resistance and power, but she also dominates, she inspires terror. For women who feel victimized by the patriarchy, being a witch is not only resisting, but also turning male-prescribed fear on its head. Adopting this persona is an act of embodying traditionally male archetypes of the saviour, the rebel, and the leader. Women who were executed for witchcraft in Europe in the Middle Ages, however, were not extraordinary or devilish. Instead, they were ordinary women, members of the church and the community (Ehrenreich and English 16). While some cases may have involved women who challenged local authorities, otherwise unremarkable women accused each other of witchcraft over small disagreements and instances of jealousy as well as more serious issues like property disputes.

[30] See p.2 for the distinction between magic/magick

As explored in the second chapter of this thesis, the road to recognizing midwifery as a viable and respected profession has been fraught with challenges and complications brought on by two powerful institutions: medicine and law. Birth is a politicized subject due in no small part to its religious implications. It has its own mythology, a repeated narrative of birth as a miracle, a divine gift meant to be embraced by mothers to be and their communities; a process of creation from which men are inherently excluded, which they cannot embody. This is the so-called magick of being a woman: the ability to experience being a co-creator with the divine. Birth also has a religious dimension in regard to the pain of childbirth and its biblical explanation as to the consequences for Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. While modern obstetrics had attempted to minimize this pain and ensure better outcomes for both mother and child traditional medicine views it as a natural, unavoidable part of the experience. However, as McKay's novel argues, pain-free birth is not necessarily a better option if it means that the new mother doesn't remember bringing her child into the world, and her opinion is well supported by the troubling rates of maternal death in developed nations with high c-section rates (Kaplan 2019; Lake 2008). Early twentieth-century obstetric experts, such as Joseph DeLee, recognized the better outcomes of women who gave birth at home, partly due to the increased risk of postpartum infection through exposure to other patients and questionably sterile instruments (Leavitt 1358). Despite the evidence that hospitals were not necessarily a safer place to give birth, DeLee still believed that hospitals were the future of obstetrics since he felt strongly that medicalizing birth would be mutually beneficial for both the obstetrician and mother (Leavitt 1357). What's more, physicians at the time struggled to understand women's health. This is made evident by Dora's

neurasthenia diagnosis, a "female disorder that presents itself through hysterical tendencies" (McKay 194), which Dr. Thomas explains is caused by "premature exposure to the primitive and sometimes unseemly regenerative aspects of womanhood" (McKay 194). He explains that practicing midwifery as a teenager "coupled with [her] current desire to bear children, has left [her] in a constant state of nervousness. [Her] fragile psyche has forced [her] female organs to collapse, leaving [her] barren and gaunt with illness" (ibid). Many aspects of women's medicine at the time can be looked back on in bafflement, such as the belief that morning sickness is neurotic in nature, brought on by pregnant women who want to get attention from their husbands (McKay 320).

As time has passed and the fear of midwife-witches has subsided, midwifery has experienced a renaissance of sorts. In Canada, midwifery has experienced a resurgence since the 1990s, when the profession became provincially regulated, starting with the midwifery act of 1991 in Ontario. This has resulted in a rise in midwife-related cultural productions such as documentaries, notably *The Business of Being Born* (2008) and *Mama Sherpas* (2015) as well as television series such as BBC's *Call the Midwife* (2012-present). As of 2017 statistics, midwives lead 10% of births in Canada, and the number of registered midwives has more than tripled in less than 15 years (Canadian Association of Midwives 2019). While midwifery is on the rise both in terms of midwife-assisted births and new midwives graduating and coming into the practice, programs remain underfunded and this influx of new midwives cannot keep up with the demand for natural birth (Mullin 2017). While there are many valid reasons as to why medical intervention might be recommended to a woman in labour in contemporary times, these interventions are not always warranted, as explored in Ricki Lake and Abbey Epstein's documentary

The Business of Being Born (2008). They argue that viewing birth as a surgical problem benefits the hospital, not necessarily the mother and her newborn. Instead of the unpredictable, messy, and sometimes days-long event, birth has become a sterile, controlled, and hastened process that lengthens healing time for the mother and robs her of the experience of participating in bringing her child into the world. It is this experience that brings women together, a key source of feminine wisdom that is at the heart of *The Birth House's* conception of womanhood and women's magick.

3.2 The Embodied Wild Woman

Witches are figures feared for their power and autonomy. They present an extreme, monstrous expression of an already marginalized group; the disgust they generate exemplifying their power to resist what Kathleen Skott-Myhre calls "masculinist social formations" (8) and this power brings with it the "threat of [the] death" of both male power and the submissive woman. (Skott-Myhre 17) Opposing the witch is the princess, whose calm passivity is challenged by the witch. She is an instrument of the patriarchy who learns–and teaches–that "submission to sexual violence can lead to rewards" (Skott-Myhre 17). By enabling sexual violence and female marginalization, she stands in the way of the witch's desire for liberation and agency.

Biblically, a woman is conceived as property. She has doomed humanity to sin and temptation due to her relation to Eve and her body is a testament to her failings. Her body and its reproductive capacities are reminders of these failings (Skott-Myhre 18) as an imperfect child of a perfect, male god. While older religions have inspired female-led societies (Skott-Myhre 18), Christian religions supported the notion of biopower,

controlling the female body "as a site of literal reproduction" (Skott-Myhre 19) and limiting women to Cartesian mind/body dualism of viewing women as limited to instinct, hormonal impulse, and reproduction while viewing men as intelligent, superior, and reasonable (Skott-Myhre 32).

By rooting women to their bodies, it then becomes possible to think of them as unreasonable, lacking in intellect and logic (Skott-Myhre 32), further marginalizing them by targeting their bodies and body-centered knowledge to suppress women's power (Skott-Myhre 30). Over time, this has influenced the way in which women have learned to conceptualize themselves and their sisters. Skott-Myhre writes:

> Women's way of knowing cannot be separated from their bodies any more than their bodies can be separated from the lineage of other women's bodies that precedes them. For women, the question of the female body has always held a complex relation to their positioning within society. (31)

Part of the rise of Wicca and witches is the notion that witchcraft is part of a larger female legacy, a birthright of sorts. Contemporary historian Carlo Ginzburg

> felt it was still true that the images and the ideas that underpinned the notion of the early modern witch religion drew heavily on folk traditions which themselves derived ultimately from an ancient pagan fertility cult. He did not, however, suggest that the cult concerned itself survived through the Middle Ages and that the people accused of witchcraft had still practiced it. (Hutton 123)

Yet, this narrative of a long-lost feminine tradition that can unlock true feminine power and spiritual awakening persists through the notion of the 'Wild Woman', believed to be an original, true representation of femininity before the patriarchy:

> The Wild Woman archetype can be expressed in other terms that are equally apt. You can call this powerful psychological nature the instinctive nature, but Wild Woman is the force which lies behind that [...] It is sometimes called 'the woman who lives at the edge of time,' or 'the woman who lives at the edge of the world'. (Estés 7)

Hence, McKay aligns the midwife-witch with the 'wild woman' through her connection with shamanistic tradition and a practice of ushering life into the world that dates back to the dawn of human civilization.

3.3 A Wave of Witchy Resistance

The witch is not just an archetype; the term is used to designate rebellious women who do not fall in line with what is expected of them. Like other slurs, it carries historical weight and significance: "When 'bitch' won't suffice to denigrate a woman, 'witch' adds an element of supernatural evil that has no male equivalent in common use" (Sollée 57). Naturally, the term has been reclaimed by feminist organizations, such as W.I.T.C.H (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) and their local chapters around North America, since "by simultaneously accepting and refuting patriarchal perspectives, some women have come to relish these words with transgressive gusto" (Sollée 80). The word 'witch', due to its associations with defiant, self-governing women, has experienced a resurgence in contemporary society, with renewed interest in witch-themed self-help books, events, and Instagram tags. From protests to news articles, witches are making their presence known as what Estés calls 'Wild Women', who seek to bring themselves closer to nature and to their female ancestors, separating themselves from the archetype of the 'domesticated woman'. These groups have risen as a result of a partial failure to

overcome the issues that first warranted a feminist movement. Unfortunately, there still exists

> legislation that targets women's sexuality and control their bodies as well as a dramatic increase in actual violent crimes against women. In much of the world, there are literal witch hunts that target women who dare to exceed the constraints placed on them by patriarchal, political, and cultural systems. (Skott-Myhre 21)

For example, women who report sexual abuse face severe repercussions, from school expulsion (Brown 2016) through job loss (Paludi 89, Shaw 2018) to death (Masih 2019).[31] With the current political climate in the United States and around the world, women have adopted witchy costumes and symbols at Women's marches in Canada, France, and abroad (Mic 2017; CBC News 2019; Bonos 2018).[32]

The witch is an alter-ego, an aspiration, a figure of agency for women resisting the patriarchy, what Sollée calls a "Darketype" (Sollée 80). Powerful women exerting resistance are still being brought-down in modern-day witch-hunts when they step a little out of line. Whether or not they practice Wicca or neopaganism, many women publicly declare themselves as witches on social media as a form of resistance, as "The term witch[33] has historically been fraught with genocidal implications as well as holding potential for rebellion premised in the subjugated knowledge and alternative creative potentials of women's way of knowing" (Skott-Myhre, 26). Witches are not just figures of resistance against male-dominated society, they can be resisting fellow women as well, women who are on board with limiting the rights of other women in the name of cultural

[31] I was unable to find scholarly sources for some of these subjects as the events in question are too contemporary to warrant in-depth, formal analysis. I used popular sources to fill this gap.
[32] ibid
[33] Underlined in the original source

tradition, beliefs, or ideologies, as Sheila Heti writes in *Motherhood*: "People think they own your body; they think they can tell you what to do with your body. Men want to control women's bodies by forbidding them from abortions, while women try to control other women's bodies by pressuring them to have kids" (94-5).

Conclusion

In *The Birth House*, there is an inherent hierarchy when it comes to how the women are treated based on the roles they take in the society of Scots Bay. A woman who is a quiet, dutiful wife and mother goes almost unnoticed by their community. In that respect, Aunt Fran is characterized as the ideal woman. In Scots Bay, a woman must be delicate and dedicated to her family and Protestant faith. As such, Miss Babineau, who is a practical, Catholic woman without a family, and Dora, who values education over marriage and rough games over lady-like tea parties, both exist in an uncanny space of being women living like men. For the women of the Bay, marriage is not a question, but a promise. These women do not have a way of making a living without their husbands, except for Miss Babineau, who lives off the generosity of the community in exchange for her services as a midwife and healer, and the Widow Bigelow, who has been married and widowed three times. Women too young to marry are their fathers' responsibility. In the worst cases, girls like 13-year-old Iris Rose Ketch are sold and sexually exploited, being beaten if they get pregnant in the process (McKay 250-252). In the best cases, their fathers are uninterested, leaving the parenting to their mothers or simply doing what they can to ensure the marriageability of their child. As such, Archer's marriage proposal to Dora is "a gift, not a choice" (McKay 250). However, after his death, Dora makes the bold decision to be romantically involved with his brother Hart outside of the context of marriage. She is firm in her desire to live her life as a free woman and create her own opportunities for choice, despite the disapproval of her mother-in-law. These women are used to being told what to do, and the Birth House represents a stronghold of the possibility of choice never before seen in The Bay. In contrast, Miss Babineau's care,

while also midwifery, doesn't have the same effect on the community because it was their only option.

Dora is a central member of her community since she not only provides medical assistance but also education. Her home is a safe space for women to trade secrets in about contraception, parenting, sexual health, and romantic relationships. As such, it becomes a community space of sorts. What's more, her at-home midwifery practice is a powerful symbol of resistance and perseverance, since it has survived attempts from both her former husband and Dr. Thomas to be shut down. Still, it stands tall, doors wide open for women and their children to come through as needed. Dora's self-given freedom from gender norms, influenced by her time in Boston, impacts her whole community, enabling other women from the Bay to choose how they want to bring their children into the world and how to cut their hair. She has certain privileges awarded to her due to her unusual circumstances as both an unmarried[34] woman and a midwife, much like her predecessor. From this position of privilege of not having to answer to a husband and having financial autonomy, Dora can put in effect long-lasting change for her fellow women, much like the George Sand quote Maxine relates to her: "The world will know and understand me someday. But if that day does not arrive, it does not greatly matter. I shall have opened the way for other women" (McKay 355).

Dora is a feminist protagonist in the sense that she is curious about the world and what it has to offer, feeling unsatisfied and out-of-place in her small town. She has a thirst for knowledge, seeking out every book she can find, despite prayers to the wind that something would happen to her (McKay 6) However, this curiosity is paired with an innate feminine sensibility in terms of her empathy and her desire to care for others,

[34] In her case, widowed

saying "All I ever wanted was to keep them safe" (McKay x). Her empathy is far-reaching, from holding and loving Mrs. Ketch's unwanted, dying child (McKay 13) to her doomed marriage to Archer, Dora takes care of others, even when she suffers in doing so. At first, Dora's relationship to Miss Babineau is forged by a sense of obligation, as mother explains: "Anything we have is hers. Anything she asks, we do" (McKay 8). This is combined with gentle curiosity and gratitude, as expressed when Dora receives her Lady Moon Doll, the very first treasure she can call her own (McKay 75-76). Her memories of Miss Babineau are fond, stitched together with deep respect and admiration, as well as the feeling that she will never live up to her late mentor's legacy (McKay 76). She ultimately fears stepping into Miss Babineau's shoes, feeling the tension between what is expected of her as a seventeen-year-old girl in The Bay, including the pressure to stay marriageable and please her family as well as the itch of wanting so much more: "I don't know that I'll ever have her kind of wisdom, or the courage it takes to live like her– to be given such little respect, to be alone. I'm scared of what it means to take a step, any step, that's not in the direction I'd dreamed I'd go" (McKay 76).

While she has always had a rebellious spirit, Dora doesn't fully embrace this aspect of her personality until her time in Boston, to which she attributes her newfound strength of thinking "for herself." (McKay 339) In many ways, *The Birth House* is a coming of age novel in which Dora is not only learning and growing into adulthood, she is learning that she does not have to make herself small to fit someone else's idea of how she should experience her femininity. Her time in Boston exposes her to other free-thinking women through a feminist book club (McKay 323), lesbian roommates (McKay 325), suffragist meetings (McKay 322), and even progressive fashion (McKay 302). She

takes these new ideas to The Bay, fearlessly standing up for Ginny Jessup by threatening a flustered Dr. Thomas with a pitchfork (McKay 347). These progressive ideas spread through her community, as demonstrated when Dora ritually cuts her friends' hair in a contemporary fashion (McKay 359) and even organizes a Mother's May Day march in Canning (McKay 361), where she calls for cooperation between midwives and doctors instead of a system that favours one over the other. While Dora's trip to Boston may have been prompted by threats from her community over the death of Experience Ketch, leading Dr. Thomas to suggest placing her in a sanatorium (McKay 294) and Wrennie in an orphanage (McKay 295), this trip proves to be more of an awakening than an escape. The trip awakens her self-confidence and personal power, enabling her to return to The Bay with a strong sense of who she is, an unapologetic fierceness in her femininity and the recognition that her community is in need of change, it is not up to her to conform but to help her community open itself up to the suffragette cause. Her time away deescalates the threats from her community, due in part to Mr. Ketch's arrest concerning his wife's death. More importantly, it gives Dora newfound confidence that allows her to step out of the position of Dr. Thomas' victim to instead become her community's new hero.

Like modern-day witches and midwives, she knows better now than to "let someone take what's rightfully yours" (McKay, 337). Dora is a witch, a midwife, a mother, and a feminist who uses the identities imposed on her by her community as a source of strength to not only empower herself, but also her community. She is a historically-informed symbol of the fight for gender equality that introduces key feminist struggles to a new generation of readers in a way that is both inspirational and educational. While McKay's midwife-witches are part of a trend of witchy feminist

figures, they serve as examples of the importance to question, resist, and reclaim our feminine bodies not only for ourselves, but for the intersectional, intergenerational, and intercultural feminist community.

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